

Wendy spent most of Friday evening waiting for the fight that never came.

They ordered pizza because neither of them had the energy to cook. Jon sat on his end of the couch scrolling through his tablet while Wendy curled into hers, a blanket pulled over her legs even though the house wasn't cold. A true crime documentary played that neither of them watched. Every few minutes Jon would glance at her and she'd brace for it. He'd barely spoken to her in the office. She was in and out of their office after lunch moving things to the new space and he'd just kept his head down too busy with work to acknowledge her. But now, he just looked at her like he barely recognized her.

"You've barely eaten," he said, nodding toward the untouched slice on her plate.

"I had a big lunch." The lie came so naturally she almost believed it herself. Her big lunch was nothing more than a granola bar and a bag of chips Michael had in his car when they drove back from the hotel. She reached for her ring. The hotel where he'd fucked on a cigarette burned mattress and covered her in his cum.

"Right. Michael took you to lunch. Was it somewhere nice?"

She stared at her pizza, afraid that if she looked at him he'd see the lie in her eyes. "Some sushi place I'd never heard of. It was fine."

Jon studied her and it looked like he was going to call her out on something. Instead, he set the tablet down on the table. "I wanted to say something about today. About the announcement."

Here it comes. She pulled the blanket tighter.

"I know I wasn't... great. In the conference room." He pushed his glasses up, rubbed the bridge of his nose. "I was caught off guard. I didn't know it was coming and I think my face probably showed that."

"It did."

"I'm sorry." He turned toward her. "I'm happy for you, Wendy. I really am. But it was also my first time hearing the news, which meant I was also processing not getting the promotion myself." He touched her leg over the blanket. "I just wish you would have told me sooner."

"You wouldn't have wanted to hear it. You..." She took a breath. She wasn't trying to start a fight. "That wasn't fair. You're right." She placed her hand on top of his. "But honestly, I didn't know for sure until Brian said my name." Another lie, smoother than the last. "I knew Michael's thoughts, but nothing was confirmed."

"Michael." Jon nodded slowly, then pulled his hand away. "Right."

They sat in silence for another ten minutes before Wendy grabbed the remote and changed the channel to a cooking show that was equally as boring. "I won't apologize for him seeing something in me." She couldn't stand the silence anymore. She knew he was judging her, hating her because Michael trusted her more than Jon.

"I don't expect you to apologize, Wendy. I just... I feel like you're pulling away."

"Maybe I'm pulling away because it seems like all we do is fight about work anymore."

Tears pricked the side of her eyes as she watched Jon. His jaw clenched and unclenched. She'd seen it countless times before when he was working out a problem in his head.

"You're right." He reached for her hand again. "Maybe now that the director position is settled we can move past it."

There was an ache in her chest as she looked into his eyes. She wanted to believe him. If he could just accept that she got the position and he didn't then maybe they could go back to the way things were.

"I hope so," she said, honestly.

"We should celebrate this weekend," He squeezed her hand. "Maybe brunch tomorrow? That place on Fourth Street you like?"

"That sounds nice."

When they climbed into bed Jon pulled her close, his hand resting on black lace of her panties.

"Are you trying to see what they feel like so you can use them while I'm sleeping?"

His fingers stilled and she couldn't help but smile.

"Wendy, I don't actually—"

She turned to face him, pressing her hips against his obvious erection.

"I think you like it more than you want to admit."

In the dark she saw his mouth open to retort. She pressed against him again making her intentions known and instead of arguing his mouth found hers.

She closed her eyes, deepening the kiss as her hand slid down to where their hips met. But behind her eyelids it wasn't Jon's mouth on hers. It was the smell of cigarette smoke and a dirty comforter. The weight of a different body.

Jon rolled her onto her back and she let him, wrapping her legs around him as he maneuvered between her thighs. He commented on how wet she was, and she purred into his ear letting him think it was all his doing.

Wendy was in the kitchen making coffee when her phone lit up on the counter. Jon was in the shower. She glanced at the screen.

Michael: Can you guess what I'm doing right now with my new favorite photo?

Her hand froze on the coffee pot. She didn't have to ask to know exactly what photo he was referring to. She should have made him delete it. She'd told herself it was fine because her face wasn't visible, that it could have been anyone. But it wasn't anyone. It was her, and of course Michael would find a way to hold it over her.

Heat bloomed low in her stomach before she could stop it. She could picture Michael right now. Alone in bed, phone in one hand while the other—

Wendy: what the hell Michael. What you do in your free time has nothing to do with me.

The reply was immediate: *In this instance I think it was everything to do with you. Do you need a picture to help you understand why?*

Wendy: I'm serious Michael. It's Saturday. I'm with my husband.

Michael: Whatever. I just thought you'd like to know I was thinking about you.

"who are you texting?" Jon asked as he padded down the hall running a towel through his hair. Wendy's face went white as she placed her phone face-down on the counter, her pulse hammering.

"Michael." She poured two cups of coffee, trying to keep her hands from shaking. "He's already sending me director stuff. Doesn't understand what a weekend is." She rolled her eyes for Jon's benefit as she handed him a cup.

"Thanks." He kissed her temple, taking the cup. "On a Saturday? You better set some boundaries now before—"

"I know, Jon!" She winced at herself. "Sorry. I didn't mean to snap. You're right. He needs to learn boundaries."

Her phone buzzed again. Then again. Jon's eyes flicked to it.

"Must be really important."

"It's not." she grabbed her phone. "I'll remind him it can all wait until Monday."

She scanned the thread: *I know you're not actually mad.*

Followed by: *Wear stockings Monday. Those legs deserve to be on display.*

She held her breath when she read the last message, quickly glancing at Jon. She'd never worn stockings before. Tights sure, but stockings felt more intimate. And why would Michael even care? It would just look like she was wearing pantyhose or maybe not even visible at all.

She was taking too long. Jon was watching.

Fine. Now stop texting me. I mean it.

She hit send before she could think about what she'd just agreed to, then turned the phone over again and looked at Jon with what she hoped was exasperation.

"I told him weekends are off-limits unless it's an emergency." She sipped her coffee. "He won't listen, but at least it's on the record."

"Good." Jon seemed satisfied. He sipped his coffee as he smiled at her, probably still thinking about last night. "So. Brunch?"

"Brunch." She smiled. "Let me get ready."

The hallway was quiet when Wendy made her way to her new office at 7:03 AM Monday morning. She had a small cardboard box tucked under her arm. Her laptop, mouse, and a few other things that were left at her desk in the office she shared with Jon. She spent the weekend moving the big things in and now she stood outside the door with a smile she couldn't wipe from her face.

WENDY TAYLOR, DIRECTOR OF CLIENT SERVICES. She'd stopped to stare at it every time she came into the building as if someone was going to realize their mistake and take the letters off. When she was satisfied they were there to stay she pushed open the door, setting her box on the closest chair.

The space felt massive. She walked along the perimeter slowly, running her finger across the wall, the bookshelf, the odd painting on the wall that had been there for as long as she could remember. She had gotten use to the cramped space of sharing an office and she suddenly realized she wasn't sure what to do with all of the extra room.

Sharing an office with her husband had become suffocating. Their fights would carry over from home to the office and then back. She told herself that was at least part of the reason why they were fighting all the time, that and Jon's incessant need to question her every decision and make her feel small. Space would fix that. He could breathe without her there, and she could work without feeling like he was judging every decision she made.

She reached into the box, pulling out a photo of her and Jon. She studied it for a minute. It was taken right after they bought their house. She held up the keys proudly while he smiled behind her. That version of Wendy had been so small. So eager to please. She ran her hand over the frame. Her body was angled away from the camera, not wanting to be the center of attention. Jon encouraged it, of course. Never did anything to push her out of her comfort zone.

Her chest grew tight as she recalled the memory. She set the picture at the end of her desk then pulled out her track pad, mouse and keyboard next. Twenty minutes later she was unpacked and checking emails as downtown Columbus came to life through the window behind her.

Just after eight a knock on the door pulled her attention. Jenny stood in the doorway, smiling from ear-to-ear as Wendy glanced up from the screen.

"Sorry, I know it's early. Do you have a second?"

"Sure. What do you need?"

Jenny walked toward the desk. She was wearing a pair of jeans and a t-shirt this morning and Wendy wondered if she needed to talk to the junior associate about the dress code policy. "I was just looking at the Fletcher Hardware proposal. Jon helped me put together a spring campaign targeting suburban homeowners, but it just feels... bland."

Wendy flipped through the pages. It was mostly template language, stock photography suggestions, a social media plan that could have applied to any hardware store in the country. She pulled up the account on her computer and rolled her eyes. The company budget was minimal at best. Knowing Jon, he saw that combined with the sales numbers and thought they didn't need anything custom.

"You're right, it's boring." She closed the folder and slid it back across the desk. "We need Fletcher's customers excited. That drives sales, which increases our budget for next quarter."

"I thought that too, but Jon was worried about the budget. It's really limiting—"

"The budget is what it is. That's not the problem." Wendy leaned forward, holding Jenny's gaze. "You're pitching based on what the numbers say, not what the client needs. They've been losing market share to Lowe's for three years. They need something that makes people drive past a Lowe's to get to them."

Jenny bit her lip. "But if I push too hard and they reject it—"

"Then you own that conversation." Wendy's voice sharpened. "You make Jon see that this is the direction that will move the needle. If he pushes back, and he will, you show him projections. Show him what happens if even a tenth of Lowe's traffic comes to Fletcher instead. He'll respect the numbers, even if he doesn't respect the idea."

"That... that makes sense." Jenny stood. "You're good at this."

"I am." Wendy smiled. "Before you go..."

Jenny paused at the door.

"If you're going to be handling accounts, you need to look the part." Wendy kept her tone light, almost friendly. "Save the casual Friday look for casual Friday."

Color flooded Jenny's cheeks. For a second, Wendy thought she might actually push back. Then her shoulders dropped. "Understood. I didn't get through laundry this weekend. It won't happen again."

"That's all," Wendy said, dismissing her like she was just another employee.

When she was gone Wendy smiled to herself, she was made for this role. She was halfway through her inbox when another knock broke her concentration. She gave an annoyed sigh before looking up to see Jon standing at her door.

"Hey." He gave a crooked smile as he pushed into the office. "Love what you did with the place," he said, awkwardly.

"Thanks." She watched him move through the space, cataloging every inch. His fingers trailed along the bookshelf. He paused at the window, hands in his pockets, looking out at the skyline she got to stare at every day now. The view he didn't have from his desk.

"Big upgrade from our old space."

"It is."

"More privacy too." He turned to face her.

The way he said it made her stomach tighten. She thought about Saturday morning, Michael's texts lighting up her phone while Jon stood in the kitchen toweling his hair. The stockings she was wearing right now, the lace tops pressing against her thighs beneath her gray skirt. A secret sitting six feet from her husband.

"Jon—"

"Sorry. I didn't mean anything by it." He moved toward her desk and his eyes landed on the photo she'd set at the corner. "Oh my God, where did you find that?" He reached for it, smiling. "Talk about a blast from the past."

"It isn't that old," she laughed. "I had it in my desk. The desk in there was too small to have it out."

Jon held the photo with both hands, staring at it in a way that made Wendy's throat tighten. She could see him disappearing into the memory. The version of them that existed before any of this.

"We looked happy," he said quietly. Then caught himself. "We are happy. I just meant—"

"I know what you meant." She reached out, touching his arm. "With my new salary we can finally do some upgrades like we always talked about."

His smile faltered. His nose crinkled, brow pinching as he set the photo back down with too much care. "Yeah. Maybe."

Wendy pulled her hand back. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just..." He adjusted his glasses. "Feels like a lot is changing fast."

"Good things are changing, Jon."

"No, you're right." He nodded, but his gaze had drifted to the window again. When he looked back his eyes landed on her monitor. Wendy had three different accounts pulled up on the screen. She was doing the job that should have been his, and the worst part was that it didn't feel like they could share it.

"Jenny stopped by earlier," Wendy said, filling the silence. "She had questions about the Fletcher proposal."

Something shifted in his posture. He straightened, his chin lifting slightly. "I know. I sent her." He crossed his arms. "I told her to run the creative direction by you because I wanted your perspective. Wendy, you're looking at the whole thing wrong."

She arched her eyebrow. So that's why he was here. He wanted to pick a fight. To show her on day one that she didn't deserve this position. "And how is that exactly?"

"If you pull up the sales numbers—"

"Have you ever been to Fletchers? Taken a step inside their store?"

Jon blinked. "What?"

"Have you been in there? Talked to the owners about what they think their identity is? It's a mom and pop shop, Jon not some big box retailer that lives and dies on spreadsheets."

His jaw shifted. "The data tells us what we need to know. That's literally what gap analysis—"

"Jon." She leaned forward, both hands flat on the desk. "I've seen the numbers. The opportunity is obvious. What I need from you is a campaign that makes people feel something when they see it. If the data can't tell you what that feeling is, go visit the place. Buy a hammer, for God's sake. Then build the campaign."

The vein in his temple pulsed as Jon removed his glasses and rubbed his temple. "The gap analysis shows why they are losing ground." His voice was calm, low, like he was using every ounce of self-restraint to keep from yelling at her. "I can tell you the zip codes, the demographics, the seasonal patterns. I know which Lowe's locations are pulling their traffic and at what rate. I don't need to go shake the owner's hand to understand that."

"But you need to understand why people drive past them. Data doesn't tell you why." She shook her head. "See, this is how it always is with you. You don't see the—"

"They drive past because there's nowhere to park." He said it with such authority Wendy leaned back in her chair.

"W... what?"

He tossed his glasses onto the desk. "Look at the customer satisfaction surveys. People go to Lowes because Fletcher's has six spots in a gravel lot behind the building. The Lowe's less than two miles east has two hundred and forty."

"Well, I still think—"

"You know what else the data shows. The weather."

Wendy tilted her head.

"It's rainy season, Wendy. Would you rather walk through mud and gravel or a paved parking lot?"

Wendy's hand drifted toward her ring under the desk. She opened her mouth to tell Jon he was out of line, but quickly closed it. He was right. She hated how right he was. She watched as he scoffed at her, snatched his glasses and headed toward the door.

"So," she said, stopping him mid-stride. "What's your recommendation."

He turned to look at her over his shoulder. "They've got a vacant lot adjacent to their property." He took a breath. "They need to save money on advertising this quarter, use the generic campaign I put together and then after they acquire the lot they do a whole campaign around expansion, improved parking, the works."

"Fine. But I still think you need to go visit the store."

He shook his head. "You know, the parking data would have come up in my full report. All you had to do was wait for me to give it to you. There was a reason Marcus trusted me, you know."

"I do trust you, Jon. But Jenny—"

"Jenny is a junior associate who is eager to impress her boss." He tapped the doorframe twice with his palm and walked out. His footsteps receded down the hallway, steady and even. Wendy listened until they faded, then stared at the Fletcher file on her screen. The parking data. Six spots in a gravel lot. She hadn't known that. She should have known that. She told herself that was the worst of it.

She reached for her coffee when a voice carried down the hallway.

"There she is. Director Taylor in the flesh."

Trevor materialized in her doorway, one hand resting on the frame, the other holding a travel mug. He didn't step inside. He was being loud enough that everyone on the floor could hear him.

"I just wanted to drop by and congratulate you properly, Wendy." His smile was wide, all of his teeth showing, like a proud parent. "Not everyone gets to move up that fast. It's inspiring, honestly. Gives the rest of us something to aspire to. What's your secret?"

"Thank you, Trevor." She reached for her ring under her desk. "Just a lot of hard work."

"Of course. Hard work." He raised his travel mug in a mock toast, eyes never leaving hers. "All those long nights strategizing with Michael. Really paid off, didn't it? You earned every inch of this."

The emphasis on every inch made the hair on the back of her neck stand up.

He pushed off the doorframe and was already typing out a message on his phone, his footsteps disappearing down the corridor before she could respond.

Her face was red with anger. He was being childish and petty because of the Skyline account. It would blow over soon enough. She released the ring and turned back to her monitor. Seventeen emails were now twenty-three.

This was fine. She was a Director now. She had Michael's backing. Trevor was just noise. But her fingers trembled slightly on the keys, and she hated herself for it.

Two hours later, her door opened again, this time without knocking. She looked up from her computer, annoyed. When she saw Michael enter the room her pulse stuttered.

"Look at you." He smirked as he walked into the office like it was still his. His eyes dropped from her face to her blouse, then lower. She'd unconsciously pushed her chair back from the desk allowing him a quick sweep of her legs. "You look good behind that desk. Powerful."

He knew. She could tell by the way his gaze lingered a half-second too long below her waist. She couldn't tell if he'd actually seen anything or if he was just checking, but the heat that crawled up her neck told her he'd seen enough.

"Did you need something, Michael? Because if not, it's already been a stressful morning and I have work to catch up on." She did her best to focus on her monitor and not the way her pulse quickened as Michael moved further into the room.

"Lots of good memories in here." His eyes traveled from her face to the desk, ignoring her comment completely. "This thing could hold some weight." He moved toward her, his bulk filling the space. "I think it's time we give it a proper christening. Don't you?"

The familiar tightening low in her stomach was back, the ache between her thighs where the lace tops of the stockings gripped her skin. She pressed her knees together under the desk.

"Not here." She tried to sound authoritative as she glanced at the door. Trevor's voice still echoed in her head. "People are already talking, Michael. I'm not giving them ammunition."

"Let them talk." He sat on the edge of her desk, shifting his weight. The framed photo of her and Jon tipped forward, then fell shattering on the floor.

Wendy stared at the broken frame. At Jon's face split by a diagonal fracture.

"Shit." Michael glanced at the fractured frame on the floor. "Didn't see it."

Wendy stared at the photo. The glass had spiderwebbed from the corner across Jon's face.

"You've been in here for two minutes and you're already breaking things." She stood, walked around the desk and picked up the frame. She hesitated as she did, a brief second, then bent at her knees to pick up the frame. She wasn't sure if he'd knocked it over on purpose to get a proper view of what she was wearing, but she wasn't going to give him the satisfaction. "This is my office, Michael, not yours." She put the frame face down in the drawer.

"Fair enough." He raised his palms. "You can't trust yourself to be quiet. I can't say I blame you." He leaned back, bracing his hands on the desk behind him as he watched Wendy's irritation grow. "Let's go back to your house for lunch. I would love to—"

"Absolutely not." Her hands slammed down on the desk. She thought about Jon getting home from work, he'd notice something was off.

"My house is off limits. That's not negotiable." She wet her lips. He looked shocked by her assertiveness. He probably didn't expect the outburst. Good, she liked it when he was on his back foot. "What... what about the motel again. It was close." She squirmed in her seat, her body temperature rising as she thought about how degrading the place was.

Michael tilted his head with an amused expression on his face. "No... I want this time to be special?"

Wendy rolled her eyes. "I don't know what you think is happening Michael but I'm just—"

"We'll go to my place."

Wendy blinked. In all the months of hotel rooms and backseats and that filthy motel, she'd never once been to Michael's home. He existed for her inside Buckeye's walls and inside whatever room he'd booked for the afternoon.

"I... what? Your place?"

"It's not far from here. Maybe ten minutes." He stood from the desk and moved around to her side. Before she could react his hand was on her knee, sliding the hem of her skirt up just enough to expose the lace band at the top of her thigh.

When his eyes met hers again the smirk said everything he didn't.

His fingers on the lace were barely a touch, but the quiet satisfaction in his expression made her face burn.

Her stomach clenched as she pushed his hand away and tugged at her skirt. "I told you. Not here."

He leaned closer to her, his voice a whisper. "I've been thinking about what's under this skirt since you walked into the building."

"You're lucky I'm wearing it at all. You need to learn boundaries, Michael." Her tone wasn't as harsh as she'd hoped it would be. It almost sounded playful. She heard it and hated it. She clicked open her calendar.

"Besides, I have a full afternoon. The Skyline metrics are due to Steve by three, I still need to review Jenny's Fletcher revisions, and I have a call with the Corsetti brothers at four." She scrolled through the blocks on her screen, not wanting to look up and meet his eyes. "So whatever you're imagining, it's not happening today."

"Sure." Michael buttoned his jacket. He didn't argue. Didn't push. Just watched her with that patient, knowing expression that made her want to throw her coffee at him.

Her cursor hovered over the noon slot. She told herself she was checking for conflicts. That's all. Just making sure nothing was already scheduled there, because a good director keeps a clean calendar. Her index finger clicked. A new block appeared: *Out of Office — 12:00-2:00 PM.*

She typed nothing in the description field. Left it blank. A two-hour void in the middle of her Monday that could mean anything. Lunch with a client. An errand. A dentist appointment.

Michael was still watching her. He hadn't moved toward the door.

"While you're not thinking about it." His tone shifted, to business. "Jack Peterson will be here in a week. Walk me through the plan."

"Numbers review here in the morning. Dinner that evening." She watched him carefully now, the way his shoulders squared at the mention of dinner. "He wants to discuss the national rollout. He sees this as a bit of a celebration dinner I think."

"Good. I'll clear my schedule for the dinner."

"Actually." Wendy paused. "Jack requested it be just the two of us."

His jaw didn't clench. His expression didn't darken. But his weight settled differently, the hand buttoning his jacket stalling for a half-second before resuming.

"Just the two of you."

"He trusts me, Michael. It's a good thing" She kept her tone professional. "If you're there he'll defer to you out of habit. I need him focused on the strategy, not the hierarchy."

Michael studied her, his hand clenching into a fist then lying flat on the desk.

"All right." He shook his head "But he's going to expect the VIP treatment."

"And he'll get it."

"Meet me downstairs at noon for lunch." He paused at the door. "Don't keep me waiting."

When he was gone Wendy sat there, staring at the door. She wasn't sure what to make of his reaction to Jack. He seemed... different. She dismissed the thought and opened her desk drawer. The frame was ruined. She could barely make out Jon's face through the spiderweb of cracks. She'd have to find time to replace it.

Ava had been watching the feed all morning. She took no satisfaction watching Jon be talked down to by his wife. There was however a flicker of amusement when Jon turned it around on Wendy and made her realize just how in over her head she was. But aside from that, she just sipped her coffee and watched.

Then Michael walked in and closed the door and Ava nearly knocked over her coffee mug.

She caught it with her left hand, eyes locked on the center feed. The audio crackled to life. First his voice, then hers. Ava turned up the volume, the tinny speakers filling her bare apartment.

For twenty minutes she watched them talk. He sat on the edge of her desk. Knocked over a picture frame. Wendy's frustration climbed but nothing happened. No hands where they shouldn't be. No clothes coming off. Just two people negotiating something Ava couldn't quite piece together until she caught a single word that changed everything.

Motel.

She rewound the audio. Played it again.

"What about the motel again. It was close."

Motel? Ava grabbed the notebook beside her laptop and scribbled it down. Which motel? The audio didn't say. But it was close to the office, Wendy said. That narrowed it. She flipped past the pages she'd already filled. Camera placement diagrams. Michael's office schedule copied from the company calendar before her access was revoked. A timeline of every closed-door meeting she'd observed since the feeds went live.

Michael made a comment about the motel that she couldn't make out, but then followed it up quickly by suggesting they go to his place.

"Now we're getting somewhere," Ava said, to herself as she picked up her phone. She didn't know where Michael lived. It was possible that she could get that info from Marcus, but a tail would be a quicker solution.

Ava: They are going to his place for lunch. Can you follow?

The reply came thirty seconds later. *Can't. Back to back meetings until 3. Sorry.*

Ava typed an angry reply then deleted it. Typed it again making herself sound more desperate but deleted that too. She set the phone down carefully on the table. Picked it up. Set it down again. Then hurled it at the mattress in the next room where it bounced once and landed face-up on the bare sheets.

She leaned back in the folding chair until it groaned under her weight. This was a two-person operation. She couldn't chase them all over Columbus. But the motel. Wendy had said it like she'd been there before. Which meant it wasn't a one-time thing. Which meant they'd go back.

Ava sat up. She didn't need to find Michael's apartment. She needed to find a motel close to the Buckeye building where two people could disappear during a lunch break and be back before anyone noticed. That narrowed it. Not the Hiltons or the Marriotts where someone might recognize a VP from the biggest branding firm in the city. Somewhere cheap. Somewhere that didn't ask questions.

She could work with that. A motel like that would have a front desk clerk making twelve dollars an hour who wouldn't think twice about letting someone review security footage for the right price. Or maybe she wouldn't even need footage. Maybe she just needed a name on a guest registry and a room number.

She looked at the Moleskine. Twelve pages of notes. This was supposed to be simple. The cameras were supposed to catch Wendy and Michael in the act, hand her the leverage she needed to go after both of them. But they were leaving.

She couldn't control where they went. But she could be waiting at the places they came back to.

On the feed, Wendy's office sat empty. The chair still spinning slightly from where she'd pushed back from the desk. Ava closed the laptop halfway, just enough to dim the screen without killing the feed, and went back to her notebook.

The drive took closer to fifteen minutes because Michael missed the exit arguing with someone on the phone about a vendor invoice. Wendy stared out the window watching downtown Columbus shrink in the side mirror. He hadn't touched her. She'd expected him to go straight for

her stockings when they got into the car, but he kept his hands on the wheel the entire drive. She shifted in her seat. Uncrossed her legs. Crossed them again.

She wasn't disappointed. She was just noticing.

By the time he pulled into the parking garage of a high-rise condo on the east side, she'd actually had the thought that maybe this was just lunch and nothing more.

The elevator opened on the fourteenth floor and Michael unlocked a door at the end of the hall. He stepped aside, letting her enter first.

"Wow," she whispered, stepping across the threshold and taking in the view. The living room had floor-to-ceiling windows that looked out across the Scioto River. She pulled her gaze away from the view to look over the rest of the apartment. A leather sectional faced the windows. She could tell from the stitching alone it was something that was outside her price range. Her nose crinkled as she noticed the crumbs against the black material, and what looked like a half eaten bag of chips half-stuffed into the recliner. Behind it sat a bar cart stocked with bottles she recognized from the Fireball campaign.

Then the rest of it registered. The sink was buried under dishes. A pan sat on the stove with something dried and brown crusted to the sides. Takeout containers lined the counter near the bar cart, one still open with chopsticks resting inside like whoever was eating just got bored and walked away. Mail piled on the kitchen island, thick enough to slide. A gym bag sat unzipped near the door, a damp towel spilling out of it that had crossed over from smelling like sweat to smelling like mildew.

"It's not much." Michael tossed his keys onto the island. They skidded into the mail pile. "View makes up for it."

Wendy spun in a tight circle taking it all in before gravitating back toward the windows. She'd imagined this place a dozen different ways. She'd expected it to look exactly like his office. She wasn't far off.

"It's bigger than I expected." She looked out over the water. "The view is incredible."

"I couldn't agree more," he said, admiring the way her skirt had ridden up slightly.

Wendy's cheeks flushed and she reached back, smoothing out her outfit. "That smell though. Michael, that towel needs to be thrown away."

"Noted." He didn't seem embarrassed, just shrugged and kicked the flap of the gym bag closed knocking the towel inside. "I'm not here enough to notice, I guess."

She crossed the living room toward the kitchen. Her gaze drifted to the shelves flanking the TV. Industry awards. Books she doubted he'd opened. And more photos than she expected. A woman with Michael's same jaw and dark eyes standing on a beach with two boys, all three squinting against the sun. Another of Michael on what looked like a camping trip, one nephew on his shoulders, the other clinging to his leg like he might blow away. A newer looking one had the boys in football jerseys holding a trophy, Michael kneeling between them. He was grinning in a way she'd never seen at the office. He looked proud. Like a man with his arms around two kids who clearly worshipped him.

She picked up the football photo. "Your nephews, right? Gosh, they're getting big."

"Growing like weeds." Michael dropped onto the arm of the sectional, and loosened his tie. "Tyler's twelve now. Plays quarterback. Kid's got an arm on him. Danny's the smart one. Nine years old and reads more than most adults I know."

"You sound like a proud dad."

"Uncle." He corrected, but the smile only grew. "Their actual father is a waste of space. My sister picks winners." He ran his hand through his hair "Two divorces by forty. But the boys turned out good despite him."

Wendy set the photo down carefully. She recognized the shift in his voice, it was a side of Michael she didn't see very often. She moved toward the sectional, then remembered the crumbs and decided to stand.

"You're good with them."

"I like kids." He shrugged. "They have a no bullshit approach that really resonates with me." He groaned as he stood back up and untucked his shirt. "More people should be like that."

She thought about the first time she'd seen those photos, back in his office when this thing between them was still... whatever it was. He'd said something similar then, that kids hadn't learned to be ashamed yet.

"You ever think about having your own?" She wasn't sure why she asked.

"Sometimes." He took a small step toward her. "Not the minivan bullshit. But yeah. I'd be a damn good father."

"Humble as always." She couldn't help but laugh.

"What about you and Jon? You two ever talk about it?"

The question landed differently than she expected and she was suddenly very aware of where she was. "We decided early on it wasn't for us. Jon's never been the type. He likes things... structured. Kids would be too unpredictable for him."

"Sounds like Jon decided and you signed off on it."

"That's not—" She stopped. Took a breath. "We decided together."

"Sure you did."

"Michael."

"I'm just making an observation." He was close enough now she could feel the heat radiating from his body. "You want to know what I think?"

"I really don't."

"I think you'd be a hell of a mother." He watched as she closed her eyes, clearly not expecting the compliment. He reached out, putting his hand on her waist. "I think the reason you agreed was because you knew he wasn't the right man for the job." His fingers moved across her waist to her stomach. "You needed a real man to put a baby in you."

Her whole body went rigid. She grabbed his wrist intending to shove it away, but didn't. "That's disgusting. Let me guess, you're a real man?"

Even as she said it she felt an electric current shoot through her body as Michael's fingers curled against her abs.

"I think we both know the answer to that."

She stepped forward, her neck hot. "Is this what you do? Invite women up here and pitch them on getting pregnant?"

Michael barked out a laugh that tore through the apartment. "It wasn't a pitch." His gaze raked over her body. "And only the ones that I think can actually handle it."

She opened her mouth to yell at him then paused, not expecting the strange compliment. Before she had a chance to think of a response he was already heading down the hallway.

"Come on. Saved the best for last."

She followed him down the short hall past a bathroom she didn't look into and a closet with the door half open. The bedroom door was already ajar. He pushed it open and stepped to the side.

The room was cleaner than the rest of the apartment. King-sized bed with a dark gray comforter that looked recently made. Heavy curtains framing another wall of windows. Nightstand with a lamp and a phone charger and a book she couldn't read the spine of. It smelled like Pine-sol.

"Where the magic happens."

"You actually cleaned in here."

"Had motivation." His gaze went to the hem of her skirt.

Her stomach pulled tight. She was standing in a man's bedroom at noon on a Monday wearing stockings. She knew what was about to happen, and it was getting harder to convince herself it wasn't what she wanted.

"Now, show me what I've been dying to see all morning."

She searched his face for the smirk, the vulgarity, the aggressive hands. He just stood there... watching her.

She took off the blouse first, determined to make him wait a beat longer for what he wanted. Her hands trembled slightly as each button popped free, until she white lace bra was in full view. She shrugged it off her shoulders, turning her head to look at him.

"Is that what you were hoping for?"

He didn't respond. He just stared at her with an intensity that made her thighs rub together.

She reached for the zipper at the side of her skirt next. Her bottom lip sliding between her teeth as the sound of it dragging down rang through her ears. She stepped out of it unceremoniously, her eyes locking with Michael who didn't even blink. The white lace searing her skin as she stood before Michael wearing next to nothing.

"Fuck, Wendy." He said it low. Almost to himself. "That's even better than I imagined."

She braced for it. Expecting him to close the gap between them quickly. To toss her onto the bed and fuck her the way he had at the motel. When he didn't move, she turned more fully toward him. Waiting for the comment about her tits or her ass or what he was about to do to her.

"You're stunning. You know that? Absolutely breath taking."

Not *you're hot*. Not *look at those fucking legs*. Not anything she was prepared for. She hated how that made her squirm and look at the ground.

"So... are you just going to look or..."

Michael smiled. The cocky smile, she'd been waiting for. "Or what, Wendy?"

She licked her lips, gazing up at Michael through her lashes as he took a step toward her. She'd walked right into that one. But she didn't care, her heart was beating out of control, her pussy leaking as Michael stepped closer to her.

"Do you have a condom?" She already knew the answer.

He unbuttoned her shirt, tossing it onto the floor next to the bed, despite the dresser being within arm's reach. "If you wanted condoms, you should have let me take you to your place like I suggested." He kicked off his shoes, sending each one flying in separate directions. "Because we both know the type of man you married." He unbuttoned his pants and Wendy's pulse spiked. "I'm sure he has a whole nightstand full we could have used."

She should have been angry. She was angry. But she couldn't help but think about the box of Trojan's in Jon's nightstand. How he would reach for one every time she initiated sex.

"You're an asshole."

"And yet here you are." He closed the distance. His hand found her jaw, tilting her face up.

"Waiting for a real man."

He kissed her. The word that floated through her head was slow. It was so different from their other times together that it took her a moment to register what was happening. His lips moved against hers without urgency, his other hand coming to her waist, pulling her against him. When she opened her mouth to deepen the kiss he let her set the pace.

Her fingers pressed against his chest, waiting for the moment he shoved her to the bed, but it never came. His tongue brushed against her with a tenderness, not the wet and sloppy kisses from before. Her hands moved down his chest surprised to feel his pants still fully on. She could feel his gut pressing against her, the heat of his skin, the coarse hair under her palms. For a moment neither of them said anything.

She pulled him toward her. Walking backward until the backs of her knees hit the mattress. He stood over her, one hand cradling the side of her face, thumb tracing along her cheekbone. The gentleness of it made her chest ache in a way she wasn't prepared for.

"Lie back."

She did.

The mattress gave under his weight as Michael climbed over her. She expected him to shove her legs apart. To pin her wrists the way he had at the motel, or flip her onto her stomach before she could catch her breath. Instead, his mouth peppered her throat with gentle kisses.

She stared at the ceiling, almost wishing he'd shove her face into the mattress and fuck her. His lips moved down her collarbone at an agonizing slow pace, tasting the skin above the lace of her bra. His hand played with the band of the stocking on her left thigh, his fingers running along the edge where lace met bare skin. He wasn't pulling at it. Wasn't ripping it aside. Just... touching it. Like he had all the time in the world.

"Michael—"

"Shh." His mouth moved lower, pressing between her breasts through the fabric of the bra. His free hand slid beneath her back and unhooked effortlessly. She arched slightly, letting him pull it free. The cool air hit her nipples and she sucked in a breath.

He took one into his mouth. Not biting, not devouring the way he usually did. His tongue circled slowly, his hand cupping the other breast, thumb brushing across the peak until it stiffened.

"Mmmm," she cooed softly. "What are you doing?" She grabbed at his waist attempting to ground herself into him, but he didn't allow it.

"Setting the mood." He placed another kiss on her nipple then trailed his lips down her rib cage.

"Just fuck me already, Michael."

"As much as I love hearing you beg. You deserve more than that."

This was wrong. Not the act itself, she was long past that particular crisis of conscience. But the pace. The tenderness. She ran her fingers through his thinning hair meaning to pull him back up her body.

When his lips grazed the waistband of her panties, her grip in his hair tightened, the plan abandoned.

"Uhhhhh." Her hips lifted as Michael's tongue ran along the middle of her panties.

His fingers hooked the lace, dragged it down her thighs slowly. She lifted her hips to help him, hating how excited she already was.

She was bare except for the stockings now. Michael knelt between her legs and Wendy chewed on her lip waiting for the moment his tongue touched her bare slit. When it didn't come her eyes fluttered open and she saw Michael just looking at her.

"What are you doing?" She propped herself up on her elbows.

"Looking at you."

Something in the way he said it made her stomach flip. She was suddenly keenly aware of where she was. This wasn't some seedy motel room, or his office after hours. She went to his apartment in the middle of the day. This wasn't some moment she could tell herself she got lost in, it was a full fledged affair.

His fingers slid between her legs and her thoughts scattered. He found her clit and her mouth fell open, her hips rotating on their own.

"You're already soaked."

"Don't flatter yourself."

His fingers sank into her and she gripped the blanket.

"Nnnngh."

Then they were gone. Before she could protest, his mouth was on the inside of her left thigh and her eyes snapped closed. His breath was fire against her skin as he pressed his lips against the bare skin just above the lace band of the stocking, then dragged them higher. His stubble scraped against the sensitive flesh and she flinched, her hand shooting to the top of his head.

"Michael, if you don't fuck me soon—"

"We have plenty of time." He turned his head, pressing his mouth against the lace itself and kissed the stocking. His tongue traced the edge where fabric met skin and Wendy's fingers curled into his thinning hair.

"You ever wear anything like this for Jon?"

Before she could respond he switched to the other thigh. His breath sweeping across her lips making her arch further off the bed. She squirmed, as he kissed the same spot on the other leg trying to angle his mouth where she actually needed it, but he held her hips in place with both hands.

"These look even better than I imagined." He spoke against her inner thigh, the vibration traveling straight to her core. "I love that you wore them just for me."

"I wore them because—" She stopped. There was no version of that sentence that ended well. He looked up at her from between her legs and she could see the satisfaction in his eyes. He didn't need her to finish.

His mouth moved higher. He kissed the crease where her thigh met her hip, then the other side, his hands sliding beneath her ass to tilt her toward him. She could feel his breath against her, hot and close. Her thighs tensed.

"Ohhhh fuuuck."

The first touch of his tongue was electric. she pulled down on his head needing more, but he refused to give her what she wanted. That was the part that undid her. He worked in long, slow strokes from bottom to top, the flat of his tongue spreading her open before the tip circled her clit. Her hips bucked and he pressed them back down, his fingers digging into the nylon of the stockings as he held her legs apart.

"Michael." She was panting already. One hand fisted the sheets, the other gripping his hair.

"That's... oh God." She spread her legs wider giving him better access.

"Your pussy is perfect. I'm going to be licking your juices off my sheets later."

The vulgarity of what he was saying only seemed to intensify the heat building inside her. Her core spasmed and she was hyperconscious of the way her juices slide down her thighs.

He hummed against her, the vibration making her legs shake. His tongue pushed inside her, then withdrew, flicking back to her clit in a rhythm that was designed to drive her insane. Every time she got close to the edge he'd slow down, pull back, press his lips against the stocking on her inner thigh before starting over.

"Michael, please—" Her voice cracked. She hated begging. Hated how quickly he reduced her to it.

"Please what?"

"Just... fuck. Let me cum, please. Right there. Fuck, right there."

He sealed his mouth over her clit and sucked, two fingers pushing inside her at the same time. His other hand gripped her thigh through the stocking, bunching the material in his fist. She was right there, teetering, every muscle in her legs coiled tight.

Then his mouth shifted. His tongue dragged lower, slow, tracing a path from her clit down through her folds. She felt every inch of it, the flat of his tongue fucking her before being replaced by his digits. His fingers curled inside her, keeping the pressure on that spot while his mouth traveled south. Past where his fingers worked her.

"Ohhh. Ffff Michael. What are—" The orgasm ripped through her, fogging her mind as she bucked against Michael's fingers. His tongue pressed against her ass, not penetrating, just a soft wet stroke. The sensation fused with the orgasm already tearing through her and something detonated at the base of her spine that she'd never felt before.

"Oh God. Ooooh fuck, Michael—" Her back arched off the mattress, her thighs clamping around his head as she shook. It was sharper, deeper, radiating out from somewhere she didn't have a name for. Her hand pressed against the headboard to stop herself from sliding up the bed. The other tangled in his hair, holding his mouth against her as she rode out wave after wave.

When it finally ebbed she went limp. Her legs fell open, trembling. Her chest heaved as she stared at the ceiling, her vision slowly coming back into focus. Michael kissed the inside of her thigh, almost affectionate, then sat up, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Her body was still humming, every nerve ending raw and oversensitive. She barely registered him moving up her body, barely felt his weight settle over her until the head of his cock pressed against her folds. The contact after the orgasm made her gasp, her hips jerking.

"Michael, I just—"

"I know." He rocked forward, sliding through her wetness without entering. The friction against her swollen clit sent a jolt through her that made her grab his arms. "And this one will feel even better."

He rocked again, dragging the full length of himself across her, and she realized with a spike of panic that the orgasm hadn't satisfied her. It had opened a door. She was more sensitive now, more exposed, her body already reaching for a second climax before the first had fully faded.

He pressed the tip of his pulsing cock against her entrance. "You know what I want to hear."

She looked up at him. His face was flushed, sweat already forming along his hairline, his gut pressing against her stomach. Her arousal was smeared across his chin. She should have been disgusted. She should have told him to get a towel, to give her a minute, to find a condom.

"Fuck me."

He grinned as he pushed inside her. Her mouth fell open as he moved with control she didn't know he possessed. She could feel every inch as his fingers dug into her legs.

"Faster," she whispered, locking eyes with him as a bead of sweat dropped from his forehead onto her.

"You feel so good, Wendy. So tight."

"Uggghh, yessss." She felt him bottom out. After the orgasm her body was so sensitive that the stretch nearly made her cum again on the spot. She dug her nails into his shoulders, gasping, trying to hold it together.

"I love the way your body responds to me." His voice was low, strained. He pulled back and pushed forward again only increasing the speed slightly. His hands ran down the outside of her thighs, fingers tracing the stockings from her knees to the lace bands, gripping them as he thrust. "Don't you love how my dick feels inside you?"

She couldn't answer. Her legs wrapped around him instinctively, the nylon sliding against his back as she pulled him deeper. He dropped to his elbows, his mouth by her ear, and for a long moment the only sound was their breathing and the wet slide of their bodies.

"God, you're body is on fire. You want to cum again don't you?"

"Yes. Oh God. Make me cum, Michael." She expected his movements to get more frantic by her words. Instead he came almost to a halt.

"If I had this body next to me every night. I would ensure it was properly worshipped."

"Mmm. Fuck, don't stop."

"I would watch you cum over and over again." His pace quickened and an aftershock of an orgasm seemed to wash over her.

"Yesss. Don't stop fucking me."

"I would fill you with so much cum it'd be impossible for you not to get pregnant."

"Nnnnggh." Her nails raked across his back as another moan tore out of her.

"Even while your belly started to grow, I'd still... Fuck. Still, give you everything you needed."

"Michael, stop—" But her hips lifted to meet him, her body contradicting every word. His cock hit deep inside her and she choked on the rest of the sentence.

"You'd look so fucking good." His pace sped up, driving Wendy closer in the process. His mouth pressed against her ear, his tongue snaking across it and making her gasp. "Full of me. Walking around the office. Jon would have to know."

She turned her face into the pillow. Another moan escaped her lips. Her pussy clenched around him and she knew he felt it. "Just shut up and fuck me."

"You're so wet." His hand came to the side of her face, turning her back toward him. His thumb parting her lips. "You're picturing it, aren't you?"

She told herself she was closing them to focus. To shut him out, to stop looking at his face so she could concentrate on the orgasm building inside her without his words getting in the way. Her eyes shut and his hips rolled forward again, deeper this time, and behind her eyelids the image materialized before she could stop it.

Her stomach. Round and full. Michael's hand on it the way it had been in the living room but now there was a reason for it.

Her pussy clamped down on him so hard they both groaned.

"There it is." His pace stuttered. "Fuck, you just squeezed me so tight."

She grabbed the back of his neck and pulled his mouth to hers. Kissed him hard, desperately, her tongue shoving past his lips to shut him up. She moaned into it, rolling her hips to match his rhythm, trying to drown out what she'd just seen behind her eyes with the physical. The kiss only made it worse. The second orgasm surged forward with terrifying speed, the combination of his cock and his words and that image she couldn't scrub from her brain building into something she couldn't outrun.

He broke the kiss. His forehead pressed against hers, his breath hot on her face. "I'm going cum. Mmm fuck, here it comes."

Her legs tightened around his waist. Her ankles locked behind his back, her own release teetering on the edge. It took her mouth a half second longer to catch up.

"You have to pull out."

But her legs didn't move.

"You don't really want me to." He thrust deeper, harder, and she cried out. "Not this time."

"Michael—"

"Cum with me, Wendy." His thrusts were getting more urgent now, the brutal toe-curling pace she was used to.

The pressure was building between her thighs. The fullness of Michael, the weight of him on top of her. She was losing control. Her hips bucked against him, the orgasm winding tighter with every thrust, bigger than the first, fed by everything he'd poured into her head. Her hands left the sheets and grabbed onto his back, holding him in place so he wouldn't leave and tease her again.

He pinned her hips to the mattress with his weight, grinding deep. "Your body knows what it wants." His breath was ragged now, his own release imminent. "It wants me to breed you."

"Ohhh fuck." Her eyes squeezed shut. She couldn't think. Couldn't form a sentence that wasn't his name.

"You want to cum don't you? Cum with me, Wendy."

"Yessss." The words fell out of her mouth. "Oh God. Don't— fuck, Michael, don't stop—"

His cock pulsed inside her and the heat of his release spread through her like a current. The groan that tore out of him vibrated through her chest, raw and broken, and it pushed her over the edge she'd been clinging to.

Her orgasm intensified, peaking again just as she thought it was starting to fade. "Oh god. Uh, ah, ooh fucckkk. Mhmmmmmmmm."

Michael looked down at Wendy, her eyes were closed but her mouth hung open, gasping for air as she felt his cum flooding into her body. Her pussy clamped down on his cock, milking him as

her back arched completely off the bed. Her legs locked around him, the stocking-clad thighs squeezing his waist, pulling him deeper even as the rational part of her brain screamed at her to push him off.

When her climax finally died, she still didn't push him off. She held him there, her body trembling, aftershocks rippling through her as he pulsed again and again. His forehead dropped against her shoulder, his breathing harsh and broken against her skin. She ran her hand up his neck, the slick of his sweat coating her fingers as she ran them through his hair.

For thirty seconds, neither of them moved. The only sound was their breathing and the hum of the building's ventilation somewhere behind the walls.

Then the fog cleared.

Her legs unlocked. She stared at the ceiling, her chest heaving. Michael's weight was still on top of her, his cock softening inside her. She could feel him leaking out around the edges where their bodies met.

Michael lifted himself onto his elbows, looking down at her. "Fuck." His thumb ran along her bottom lip. "I'm never going to get tired of that."

She shoved his chest hard enough that he had to catch himself on the mattress. The immediate emptiness made her wince, the wetness pooling between her legs, trickling down the inside of her thigh and soaking into the lace of the stocking. She pressed her thighs together. She couldn't look at him. Not after what he'd just made her picture.

"I need... where's your bathroom?"

"Down the hall. Left."

She sat up. The room swayed. Her legs were unsteady as she swung them over the side of the bed, the stockings still gripping her thighs, damp now with sweat and cum. She could feel him seeping out of her with every movement. She didn't look at him. She grabbed her panties from the floor and walked down the hall on shaking legs, shut the bathroom door, and leaned against it.

The woman in the mirror looked wrecked. Hair stuck to the side of her face. Mascara smudged. Neck blotchy. The stockings were twisted, one rolled slightly at the thigh where Michael's hands had bunched the fabric.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck," she said to the woman in the mirror.

She turned on the faucet and pressed a cold washcloth between her legs. Her hands were trembling. She'd need Plan B again. Another forty dollars. Another lie.

She needed to get a handle on the Michael situation. She needed...

Another glob of cum leaked down her leg. Her body was still buzzing from the second orgasm. Or was it the third?

She braced both hands on the sink and stared at the woman in the mirror. She could fix this. She'd fixed everything else. The IOU, the underwear, Jon's questions, Trevor, all of it. She'd handled every crisis Michael created and come out the other side stronger.

Her eyes dropped to the washcloth between her legs, already stained.

She just wasn't sure this was a crisis she wanted to end.